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## PETER'S QUESTION, REVISED TO DATE

The International Sunday School Lesson for January 9th is, "Jesus Teaching Forgiveness."—Matt. 18: 21-35.

By William T. Ellis.

Once in the long ago, hot-spirited Simon Peter asked a famous question of Jesus concerning forgiveness. A sort of "revised version" of the question, in the setting of this present time, presents itself for first consideration, as we look upon a hate-scorched, vengeance-torn world to be made livable.

Says Peter the American, "The Old World has wronged me. Because I believed its high professions of love of liberty and justice, I sent my sons by the millions to a bitter war. After the battle, though, I find the old wrongs marching on under new flags; and imperialism, oppression, and the all devious diplomacy of selfishness as busy as ever. How often shall I forgive Europe? Is it not better that we should henceforth be strangers?"

Says Peter the Canadian: "My big brother to the South has forsaken his associates and shirked his share of the war's aftermath. We paid a price beyond his understanding in the great struggle; and now he is loudly proclaiming that he is through with helping to bear the common load of the nations, and that he wants to walk alone, in comfort, prosperity and safety. How often shall I forgive him?"

Says Peter the Frenchman: "Germany has wounded me in the heart. I may be doomed to atone extinction. All the earth has rung with the horrors she has committed upon my soil and my people. Shall I forgive her, and not have revenge? Or shall I not make her pay even to the third or fourth generation?"

Says Peter the Italian: "England now has a fourth of the earth's surface, and measureless stores of oil and other precious things, as a result of the war. My people cry for bread. We shiver for lack of coal. Our trade has been wounded, perhaps mortally. Behold how I suffered in the war; yet the prizes of victory go to France and England. Shall I forgive them?"

Says Peter the Englishman: "Behold Russia the robber! She has failed us in battle; she has deprived us of food and other necessities of life; she has menaced the peace of all Asia; she has filled the whole world with her propaganda of Bolshevism. Shall I forgive Russia?"

Says Peter the Russian peasant: "For generations I have been bent beneath a burden of ignorance, oppression and poverty, all that an idle aristocracy might play and sin in leisure and luxury. At least I have cast off my old yoke. I have despoiled and impoverished and imprisoned and slain the people of privilege. With them I would cast down to destruction all the prosperous and favored bourgeoisie of the whole earth. Capitalism's day is done. Shall I forgive those who have wronged my class?"

This Way to a Remade World.

So we might call the roll of the nations, and get a recital and counter-recital, and intricate tales of wrongs and grievances everywhere. One's spirit shrinks appalled from the spectacle of hatred and ill-will that fills the whole earth. Conflict and greed, seem literally world-wide. Many persons are saying that after the war conditions are worse than the days of battle. Nobody can fairly face the political and economic facts of his time without heaviness of spirit.

And the remedy? It is at the heart of our Lesson. There will have to be born a new spirit of forgiveness, of magnanimity and tolerance, before we can have a remade world. No form of political rearrangements or economic readjustments will suffice. Only spiritual remedies can avail. Unless there is quickened in the souls of the nations and of the peoples, and especially of the gov-

ernments, an entirely new mood, there can be nothing ahead of humanity except catastrophe.

All other routes to a remade world are impassable except the way of Jesus. His doctrine of forgiveness—clean slates and fresh good will—is the one way out. Let no man say that "Sunday School-morals" are impractical; they are the most workable of all conceptions for the reorganization of society. That is why thoughtful persons the world over are turning in new yearning and expectancy to the spiritual forces of prayer and penitence, faith and forgiveness, for the re-creation of Christian civilization.

The Man With A Grudge.

A few evenings ago there approached me after a public meeting a man who asked me to read a document he handed me. I later did so: it was an incoherent narrative of conspiracies against him on the part of the strongest forces in the land. Of course, the man was unbalanced in his mind; anybody who long nurses a grievance becomes so. It is a sign of mental unsoundness, rather than of inordinate conceit, to suppose that enemies are pursuing one. A brilliant young writer in New England, who boasted that he "never forgave an enemy and never forgot a friend," committed suicide because the bitter spirit he nursed grew too great to bear. His assumption that editors and publishers and other writers were leagued against him was, of course, erroneous. He was the finished product of a cherished grudge.

To lift life above the grudge level was one of the aims of Jesus. While He was no respecter of persons, yet He dearly loved greatness of soul. He ever seeks spacious saints, with spirits too large to harbor petty feelings. Yet He Himself was so noble that He was patient with the littleness of the people about Him.

One of His own close friends, Simon Peter, came to Him, on a day, flying the red flag of anger. Some domestic quarrel or neighborhood squabble prompted him to go to the Great Teacher for endorsement of his side of the matter, by asking the question, "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Until seven times?" We know not the details of the particular feud that prompted the question; very commonly, alas, has its own examples of trivial disputes which sever friendship, disrupt homes and embitter neighborhoods.

The New Law Of Life.

Nobody is ever so sure he is wholly right as the person in the midst of a quarrel. Instead of buttressing impatiently his position by a legalistic ruling, like the rabbi, Jesus laid down a great principle of universal and permanent application. He declared to His disciples—for even the apostles were squabbling saints—"I say unto thee, Until seven times, but until seventy times seven." Forgiveness is not merely an occasionally expedient act; it is a law of spiritual life. Its exercise is not optional, but obligatory.

We are considering a cardinal and distinctive teaching of Christianity. Unequivocally, the Master laid down the higher law that His disciples must be persons of forgiving spirit. Unforgiveness shuts the door against successful prayer. More yet: the very pardon of God for our own sins is conditioned upon our forgiveness of those who have wronged us. "I cannot forgive him!" you cry? Ah, you cannot do otherwise than forgive, if you would follow Christ, whose basic law is forgiveness, and who exemplified it on the cross when He cried, "concerning His murderers, 'Father, forgive them; they know not what they do!'" Bitterness and grace cannot abide in the same spirit. "Better a cross, and nails through either hand, Than Pilate's palace and a frozen soul."

Two Kinds Of Offenses.

In describing, and illustrating by the Lesson parable of the two debtors, the divine way of settling old scores, Jesus was speaking of personal offenses. A clear distinction lies between wrongs done to the individual and injuries committed against society by violation of law. Jesus nowhere taught that impetent criminals are to be pardoned, or that offenders against the moral law are to be excused. To apply His teaching here would be to set all prisoners free and abolish all courts of justice. There is no lack of moral principle or of social responsibility in the teaching of Christ which we are considering.

As a matter of experience, most of us are too lax toward social offenders, men who have injured the community and broken the civil or criminal law; while at the same time we are not lax enough toward our personal enemies. We are more easily disturbed over what touches us than over what touches the well-being of all men. Jesus never espoused or condemned any such gelatinous spirit as people of maudlin temperament display toward the criminal. Justice demands that her sanctity be respected; only thus can humanity be kept together.

As for personal enemies, they are to be forgiven as often as they seek forgiveness. That is one of the exalted rights of the individual. As has been said, "the beautiful thing about my rights is that they are my own, and I may do as I please with them." The worst injury an enemy could possibly do us would be to implant in our hearts the spirit of vengeance. Then he really would have wounded us in a vulnerable place. But so long as we are armored in magnanimity, we are safe from any real harm at the hands of a foe. The man who knows how to forgive, knows how to live.



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